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Commission Calls on State to Eliminate its Juvenile Justice Operations by 2011

The Little Hoover Commission on Monday urged the governor and the Legislature to lay the groundwork for the creation of county-run, state-funded, regional rehabilitative facilities for high-risk, high-need juvenile offenders and for the eventual elimination of state juvenile justice operations.

In its report, *Juvenile Justice Reform: Realigning Responsibilities*, the Commission recommends streamlining and consolidating the state's juvenile justice operations into an Office of Juvenile Justice. The new office should be outside the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and would combine the activities of the chief deputy secretary of juvenile justice as well as juvenile justice grants administration and oversight now done by the Corrections Standards Authority.

The Commission found that the state is spending half a billion dollars annually on a youth offender population that has declined from 10,000 in state facilities a decade ago to fewer than 2,000 today. In the 2008-09 fiscal year, this will equate to approximately \$252,000 a youth per year. This startling figure reflects the overhead expenses of a system built to serve a far larger population, the cost of reforms required under a court-supervised consent decree and the complex needs of these seriously troubled youth.

The significant reduction in the youth offender population has been fueled by declining arrest rates for juveniles and by policy changes – most recently SB 81 – the 2007 realignment legislation that shifted responsibility for all but the most serious and violent offenders from the state to the counties. The landmark legislation also provided ongoing funding to counties for this group of youth offenders.

The Commission reviewed the progress of the realignment and found that overall, the realignment has shown signs of promise, though there are opportunities for improvement. Specifically, the Commission found that the state lacked the leadership structure to ensure the new funding is spent wisely to expand and enhance programs that have proven effective in improving public safety and helping youth offenders turn their lives around.

In assessing the management of the small but serious youth offender population that will remain in state facilities, the Commission found that California's long-beleaguered juvenile justice system is beginning to show signs of improvement. Still, advocates for youth offenders, frustrated by the pace of reform, have asked a court to place the system in receivership.

The Commission found that progress toward reform has been impeded by the 2005 reorganization which placed the California Youth Authority under the organizational structure of adult corrections. The Commission concluded that the price of reform, both in terms of replacing or refurbishing the crumbling state facilities and providing the programs and services required to satisfy the consent decree, is simply too steep.

“The Commission commends the professionalism and the commitment of the chief deputy secretary of juvenile justice and the staff working to implement these necessary, but very difficult juvenile justice reforms,” Little Hoover Commission Chairman Daniel Hancock said. “But the prospect of ever-higher outlays for an ever-smaller juvenile population in state custody should prompt policy-makers to extend realignment to completion.”

In *Juvenile Justice Reform: Realigning Responsibilities*, the Commission’s recommendations include:

Consolidate juvenile justice programs and services into a streamlined Governor’s Office of Juvenile Justice outside the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. An Office of Juvenile Justice, reporting directly to the governor’s office, should develop a strategy for a comprehensive, statewide juvenile justice system that includes a complete and consistent continuum of evidence-based services for youth and to oversee county programs funded by the state General Fund.

Create one dedicated funding stream for local juvenile justice programs and services. To ensure the success of juvenile justice realignment, the governor and Legislature must bolster the accountability and oversight of the state’s three major juvenile offender grant programs – the Youthful Offender Block Grant, the Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act funding and the Juvenile Probation and Camps Funding Program – by creating one stable funding stream that is tied to performance-based outcomes.

Extend the sunset of the State Commission on Juvenile Justice. The State Commission on Juvenile Justice should be extended until 2010 to assist counties in implementing the recommendations in its Juvenile Justice Operational Master Plan and to provide oversight of the realignment process. Additionally, this body should serve in an advisory capacity to the Governor’s Office of Juvenile Justice.

Eliminate state juvenile justice operations by 2011. The Governor’s Office of Juvenile Justice should be responsible for guiding, facilitating and overseeing the development of new regional rehabilitative facilities or the conversion of existing state juvenile facilities into regional rehabilitative facilities for high-risk, high-need offenders to be leased to and run by the counties. Through the Office of Juvenile Justice, the state should continue to provide guidance and oversight of the regional juvenile facilities and administer dedicated funding to counties to manage the regional juvenile offender programs and services tied to performance-based outcomes.

The Little Hoover Commission is a bipartisan and independent state agency charged with recommending ways to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of state programs. The Commission’s recommendations are sent to the governor and the Legislature. To obtain a copy of the report, *Juvenile Justice Reform: Realigning Responsibilities*, contact the Commission or visit its Web site: www.lhc.ca.gov.